

May 23, 2017

Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
700 H Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Vote Center Model for Elections item on May 24 agenda

Dear Supervisors:

This week you are taking up a very important decision: whether to move to a “vote-center” model or continue operating neighborhood polling places. This option is before you due to the enactment of Senate Bill 450 in 2016, creating the new “Voters Choice Act” and permitting counties that wish to do so to establish a new model for voting.

The Voters Choice Act, or VCA, allows counties to eliminate neighborhood polling places and replace them with a new voting process where every registered voter is sent a vote-by-mail ballot and provided with county-wide drop boxes and vote centers prior to and on Election Day where they can return their ballots, obtain replacement ballots or receive any needed assistance, among other services. SB 450 sets various requirements counties must comply with in adopting the VCA model, including a requirement to conduct extensive public outreach.

While the California Voter Foundation (CVF) was neutral on SB 450, we are committed to seeing its effective implementation in counties that choose to implement it. If you decide to implement the VCA in Sacramento County, we ask that you treat the requirements of SB 450 as a floor, not a ceiling, and go a few steps further than the law requires. Specifically, we encourage you to do the following:

- 1) **Provide postage-paid ballot return envelopes.** While SB 450 does not mandate paid postage, Sacramento County has long made it a policy to provide paid postage for voters who live in precincts where no local polling place is provided. By giving voters postage-paid envelopes, you will be sending a message that you value those voters and their ballots and recognize that many people, especially young people who are already underrepresented in the voting process, do not have ready access to postage stamps. Alternatively, not providing paid postage could cause some to view the new voting process as a poll tax and lead to negative public reaction to this new program. In the November 2016 election, eight California counties - Alpine, Marin, Plumas, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and Sierra – provided postage-paid return envelopes to all their vote-by-mail voters, not just those placed in all-mail ballot precincts. Since this is a trend we hope will spread to other counties, CVF is supporting AB 216 in the Legislature to require postage-paid mail ballot envelopes statewide, funded with state dollars.
- 2) **Direct the Registrar of Voters to contact voters whose ballots are rejected due to signatures not matching and give them the opportunity to correct and “cure” their ballots so that they are counted and those voters are not disenfranchised.** While voting by mail is popular in Sacramento, it is not without its problems. Every election, thousands of ballots are rejected for a number of reasons, but primarily due to being returned too late, missing signatures or signatures failing to match. Sacramento County Elections does an excellent job contacting voters

to fix their ballots but they are not required by statute or county ordinance to do so. The county's current efforts, combined with statutory changes CVF supported, has helped bring Sacramento's rejected ballot rate to .5 percent in the November 2016 election. This is a significant reduction from previous rates: a 2014 CVF vote-by-mail study found the county's average rejection rate was 1 percent during the 2008-2012 election period. Still, .5 percent represents nearly 2,000 completed Sacramento County vote-by-mail ballots that were rejected and not counted in the last election.

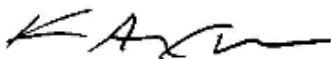
It is important to note that rejection rate is among voters who have *opted* to vote by mail. It is reasonable to expect that the vote-by-mail errors will rise even higher when more voters are urged to cast vote-by-mail ballots. CVF has been working with the Elections Department to improve the envelope wording and design but it remains the case that voting by mail is more complicated and requires voters to follow more directions, with no in-person assistance, than voting at the polls. One way to ensure that expanded use of vote-by-mail does not lead to a higher mail ballot rejection rate is to direct the Elections Department to conduct outreach to voters with problem signatures and help those voters correct and cure their ballots so that they can be lawfully cast and counted, and provide the resources necessary to do so.

- 3) **Direct the Elections Department to locate a vote center in every designated community in the county.** SB 450 only imposes this kind of provision on Los Angeles County; Sacramento can adopt this requirement in its own implementation to ensure that all of the county's voters and would-be voters have access to a vote center in their own community. The County's "Community Boundaries" map could serve as a guide in this effort:
http://www.per.saccounty.net/Documents/Maps/Community%20Boundaries_0211.pdf.
- 4) **Encourage the Elections Department to coordinate its outreach with other government agencies within the county.** Every politician in the county has a stake in this process and it would be beneficial to consult them and their staff when deciding where to locate vote centers and how to best identify and reach out to community leaders. This outreach effort could include congressional, legislative, and city council offices and special districts, and would help make the required public outreach efforts even more effective. The Elections Department already has a strong record of working with local governments to provide ballot drop boxes at their offices.

We realize some of these recommendations will cost additional funding to implement. However, it's important that the county not attempt to make this transition simply to save money, but rather to give voters and would-be voters more options and a better overall voting experience. The California Voter Foundation has been working with the County's Elections Department and other stakeholders for over a year to pursue strategies and develop a funding proposal to provide ongoing state funding to support local election administration. It is CVF's hope and goal that in the future, the administrative cost of elections will be a responsibility shared by both state and local governments.

Thank you for your consideration; if you'd like to contact me, I can be reached at 916-441-2494 or at kimalex@calvoter.org.

Sincerely,



Kim Alexander
California Voter Foundation